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THE MEANING  
OF  
OUR NATIONAL BEREAVEMENT



*A Memorial Sermon*

UPON THE DEATH OF

PRESIDENT MCKINLEY

BY

REV. RANDOLPH H. MCKIM, D. D.

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THE MEANING  
OF  
OUR NATIONAL BEREAVEMENT



A Sermon

ON THE  
DEATH OF PRESIDENT MCKINLEY

DELIVERED IN  
THE CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 1901

BY THE RECTOR  
REV. RANDOLPH H. MCKIM, D. D.

Πόλις γὰρ . . . . . ἄγαν  
Ἦδη σαλεύει κάνακονφίσαι κάρη  
Βυθῶν ἔτ' οὐχ οἷα τε φοινίου σάλου  
*Sophocles, Œdipus Tyrannus*

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good, however illustrious. But here, if anywhere, it is meet to ask the meaning of an event so solemn—so distressing to our whole land. Here, if anywhere, the Christian heart must ask what message such an afflictive dispensation brings—what God is saying to the American people to-day by permitting such a strange and awful event. The prophet cries in our text, "*Shall there be evil in a City, and the Lord hath not done it?*"

It would be infidelity, it seems to me, not to recognize that this great national affliction ought to be considered in the light of the Divine Providence. There is a profound sense in which it is true that this calamity which has overtaken us is from God. We must look back of the assassin who fired the shot—back of the wickedness that conceived the deed—back of the demoniacal hatred of order and law that furnished the inspiration of the awful crime—to the Will of God which permitted it to be done, and which did not spare the life so precious to the people. "*Shall there be evil in a City, and the Lord hath not done it?*"

Well then let us recognize in this afflicting event the hand of the Divine Providence, and let us ask, here in the Sanctuary of God—here with bowed

heads and hushed hearts in the Divine Presence— what is the meaning of so terrible an occurrence? What is the lesson which God is teaching us by this strange dispensation?

Seeking an answer to this question, the first thought that demands expression is that this event, like all others, has not happened without God. Human malice and wickedness has its liberty of action. It lays its plot, and strikes its cruel blow in the exercise of that freedom which is given to men. But it cannot go beyond the limit of its tether. In inscrutable wisdom the Almighty sets bounds to the free action of His creatures.

When Jesus Christ stood before Pilate, and that proud Roman said to Him with some petulance, indignant at His silence, "Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and I have power to release thee?" the majestic Prisoner answered, "Thou couldst have no power at all against Me, except it were given thee from above."

Yes, even a Pilate and a Judas and a Caiaphas could not have compassed the death of Christ, unless they were permitted by the Divine Providence to do the awful deed of murder upon the holy and spotless Son of God.



The fact is of deep interest and value in our reflections upon the awful crime which has stricken down our noble President, and plunged our whole nation into mourning. It may teach us that this assassin, with all his scheming, and with all his wicked and reckless determination to do that good man to death, could not have compassed his end, unless liberty of action had been permitted him from above. The high and sublime purposes of the Divine Government of the world for the development of character and for the advance of the race in the path of intellectual and spiritual and moral progress can only be attained by giving to man the god-like prerogative of freedom—freedom to do evil as well as to do good ; but then there is a limit to the exercise of this liberty. Man cannot so use it as to defeat the ultimate plans of the Divine Wisdom. There reside in the Providence of God resources of power and wisdom and love which will ever defeat the designs of evil men in the long run, so that even in the flush of a terrible success, the purposes of wickedness and crime against mankind and against the Kingdom of God are brought to nought.

It was the purpose of that malign plot of Caiaphas and the chief priests with Judas Iscariot, in com-

passing the judicial murder of Jesus of Nazareth, to crush out His religion and to strangle His Church at its birth. Their plot succeeded, as it seemed, and the Prophet' of Galilee was put to an ignominious death on the cross. Thus far the Divine Providence permitted them to go, but no farther. In their ultimate end and purpose they utterly and absolutely failed. Infinite Wisdom completely baffled them. Not only did they not succeed in crushing the Religion of Jesus, but the means they employed became the mightiest instrument of its propagation. The success which they fancied they had achieved when they saw the Son of God bow His thorn-crowned head and give up the Ghost became the means of the triumph of His Church, and the shameful, bloody cross was transformed into the symbol of glory and victory!

We may be very sure, my brethren, that the ignominious failure which befell the attempts of Caiaphas and Judas against the Anointed Christ will ultimately overtake all plots and conspiracies against Truth and Righteousness on this earth. The Almighty has not vacated His Throne. He is the Ruler and the Judge of the world. His hand of unerring wisdom is guiding the course of events and

ordering the evolution of human history to His own sublime ends. "Clouds and darkness" may be round about Him, but "Righteousness and Judgment are the habitation of His throne." We sometimes vainly seek to read the meaning of His Providence. This is one of those times. It is an inscrutable dispensation. The reasons for it are hidden from us. We can only say with the Psalmist, "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known."

But one thing we know. The success of the plot against our President is only for the moment. The assassin has stricken him down to death, and this mighty nation of freemen is to-day bereaved—sorrowfully bereaved because its chosen ruler has been slain. But the real ultimate purpose of the assassin and his fellow conspirators, if he had any, will ignominiously and utterly fail. Their blow was aimed, through President McKinley, at our Government—at Law and Order and Justice and Civilization. Too well did that blow succeed in striking down that noble man who ruled in integrity and purity and wisdom over the destinies of the American people. But has the assassin's bullet reached its ultimate object? Have Order and Justice and Gov-



ernment been wounded or weakened by that wicked shot which was fired in Buffalo nine days ago?

On the contrary, the shot has fallen far short of its object. The order of Society has not been touched. The framework of government has been strengthened, not weakened. The sword of Justice has been sharpened not sheathed, and it will descend at length not only upon the wretched miscreant who did the dark and cruel deed of death, but upon the thing which he represented—that foul shape of Anarchy which has, too long, been permitted to stalk about in this land of Freedom, polluting it by its vile presence, and, unhindered plotting its schemes of assassination in our midst. Yes, this seeming triumph of Anarchy will become the instrument of its destruction. The foul murder of William McKinley seals its fate in this free land. The people will stamp it out.

To-day the American people stand with tearful eyes and sorrowing hearts by the bier of their chief—the man whom they have delighted to honor and to whom they gave their confidence and their love in a truly remarkable degree; but this their common sorrow binds them closer to each other—makes them stronger and braver, and more deter-

mined to conserve their institutions, and to consecrate their energies to the great destiny which God has set before them. They are girding themselves to the solemn duties of their national calling this day, with hearts more chastened, more earnest, more sincere, more unselfish, than before. The character of their murdered chief will inspire them. His uprightness and honesty and devotion to the interests of the whole country (for he was not the President of a party, but of the American people), will long be a beacon to shed light on their path. William McKinley is dead indeed, but "he yet speaketh"—and his words and his example will speak to the American people more mightily from the grave than ever they did from the White House.

That last speech of his, spoken only the day before his assassination, was indeed a noble utterance. It was replete, as perhaps no previous utterance of his had been, with the wisdom of a broad and comprehensive statesmanship. He spoke not as the head of a great political party, but as the Father and counsellor of his people. And his words will sink deep—deeper now than if this awful tragedy had not occurred—into the hearts of the people. I

cannot but think they will have a strong and beneficent influence on our public policy.

But I must not permit myself to speak here and now of Mr. McKinley as a statesman. I will not even dwell upon what I regard as possibly his greatest claim to the gratitude of the American people—I mean his work of reconciliation between the North and the South, estranged by the civil war, and never made wholly one till this man “whose heart had grown as broad as the Union,” seized the opportunity offered by the Spanish War to knit them together again.

But, as a minister of Jesus Christ, and speaking here in the Sanctuary of God, I emphasize the influence he has exercised, and will still exercise, though he lives no more, for virtue, for purity of character, for the faith and the practice of the Christian religion. Here is a part of him that is invulnerable. The bullet of the assassin cannot reach his private character, his life and example as a man. That still lives, and by that he, “being dead, yet speaketh.”

For more than a generation this man has lived in the public eye. The “fieree light” that beats upon the steps of those who aspire to political

honors has been full upon him ; but no spots or stains of vice or dishonor have been revealed. His has been a blameless life. He has ever been an example of domestic virtue. In an age when the sacred bond of matrimony has been so often ruthlessly broken, or the purity of that divine institution debauched by unclean living, or its beauty sullied by manifold marital infelicities, this illustrious man has set a truly beautiful example of chivalrous devotion and unswerving affection to the wife of his youth. Who shall estimate the value of such an example as a moral power in the land ?

But more than this. William McKinley being dead yet speaketh, not only as the friend and patron of virtue, but as a humble and sincere disciple of Jesus Christ. The reality and genuineness of his Christian faith has impressed itself upon the people of the country. They have believed in him as a devout follower of the meek and lowly Jesus. And so the great and far-reaching influence of his illustrious position as the chosen ruler of a nation of eighty millions of people has been thrown into the scale for the Christian Faith in a time when Unbelief has been putting forth its mightiest efforts for the overthrow of the Religion of the Nazarene.

As Christians we can but thank God for such an influence as this for the cause so dear to our hearts.

Perhaps, my friends, we may find here one of the hidden reasons why God permitted this good man to suffer that dastardly assault, and pass through that fiery ordeal of pain, and finally succumb to death. It may have been God's way of putting his Christian character to the test, that our people and the world might see how genuine and how true it was, and so might have a fresh and illustrious example of the power of the Christian Faith to enable men to come off conquerors and more than conquerors over pain and suffering and death.

Men may sneer at Christian people and impugn their sincerity and the reality of the faith they profess, but when they see a man upheld in such a trial as this, in such agony of body, in such physical weakness, and in the sharpness of death—when they mark his forgiving spirit toward the assassin—expressed, even as he sank wounded to the floor, in the ever memorable words, "Let no man harm him!"—his splendid courage, his Christian resignation to the Will of God, his unselfish tenderness to his invalid wife in such an hour of supreme trial—ah, then their unbelief must break down and they



must confess the truth and power of the Religion of Christ.

Thus the tragic sufferings and death of this illustrious man have placarded—to use an expression of St. Paul\*—have “*placarded*,” I say, before the eyes of all Christendom, yes and of the pagan peoples too, the power of the Cross of Christ to give His disciples victory over pain and death. Those whispered words of prayer, as the President lay on the operating table,

“Thy Kingdom come,  
Thy Will be done,”

will be heard all over the world: Those half-chanted lines of the dear hymn,

“Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee,  
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,”

will sound out from his death chamber into millions of the abodes of sickness and pain: And those last words of the dying President,

“It is God's way. His will be done,”

will strengthen the faith of his fellow countrymen all over the land, and teach them how to bear this inscrutable dispensation of the Divine Providence.

It is in such thoughts as these that we shall begin to spell out the meaning of the great sorrow of this

\* See Bishop Lightfoot's rendering of Gal. iii: 1.

hour. A living ex-President of the United States said very truly when news of Mr. McKinley's death came to him, "It is hard at such a time as this to calmly and patiently await the unfolding of the purpose of God." But, my brethren, that purpose will be unfolded in due time. It begins already to unfold itself in the light of that death-scene in Buffalo. "*Shall there be evil in a City, and the Lord hath not done it?*" No, it cannot be. It is the Lord, whose hand is laid on us in affliction. This thing is from Him, for our chastisement, and for our instruction, and for the greater glory of the Cross of Christ in the hearts of our people. He means to rebuke us for our materialism, for our absorption in the pursuit of wealth, for our excessive love of the pleasures of sense, and to remind us that in all the pride of our greatness we are dependent on His bounty and on His protection. For our God is He who bringeth good out of evil, and light out of darkness and victory out of defeat. Or, to use the language of this same prophet from whom our text is taken, He is the God "who turneth the shadow of death into the morning."

My dear friends, as we close our services to-day let us bethink us that for our murdered President

God has already "turned the shadow of death into the morning." You remember his pathetic question uttered the day before the end came, as the shadows began to close round him,

"Is the sunshine all gone?"

Ah, the sun had set for him on the shores of time, only to rise in greater glory, never to set again, on the shores of the Better Land. There, good and faithful servant of God and of thy people, the sunshine has come again, and thy God has turned the shadow of death into the eternal morning.



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